

'Rupture' separated arts from community

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If you want to find the right answer, it helps to ask the right question.

The crucial question about the arts in San Antonio was posed Tuesday by Pablo Miguel Martinez, a local consultant to the city's **cultural** planning venture called the **Cultural Collaborative**. A discussion among a disappointingly small group of artists and others at Palo Alto College had brought forth familiar complaints. The gist was that the quantity and level of artistic production in San Antonio had advanced much further and faster over the past 20 years than audience and business support for it, while support from government had declined. The business community, said one with a close connection to it, had little respect for the arts.

Martinez recalled a time when the West Side - stocked with intellectuals, artists and merchants who had fled the revolution against Porfirio Diaz - was alive with movie houses, live shows and carpas.

"What happened in this city," he asked, to allow a "rupture" by which art had become "disconnected from daily life?"

Martinez properly identified that "rupture" as the central problem for the arts, but it is a problem that many American cities share. Key to his formulation of the question was its focus on local specifics: "What happened in this city?"

Globally, the "rupture" Martinez identified is one face of a **cultural** fragmentation that affected nearly all aspects of life as the 20th century advanced. Three examples:

In earlier times, most scientists and artists would have regarded as bizarre the modern notion that the arts and sciences are utterly different enterprises, with the arts, of course, being mere luxuries. Employers and workers alike would have been appalled by the modern fantasy that education means acquiring "basic" job skills rather than a broad understanding of history and culture.

In 19th-century America, the knowledgeable, critical audience for Shakespeare or Verdi was as likely to wear greasy overalls as Paris fashions, and a Beethoven symphony would cohabit with popular songs and dance music on concert programs. The modern division between "elitist" and "working class" culture is entirely artificial.

Most people in 18th- and 19th-century America would have seen the modern suburban ideal of functional segregation - houses, apartments, stores, offices and workshops meticulously kept apart by zoning codes - as dysfunctional and plain stupid.

These and other "ruptures" have brought about a dismemberment of community.

The arts and other creative enterprises thrive only in whole communities, places where diverse people, ideas, interests and activities mix it up, cross paths, influence each other.

Theaters, galleries and concert halls are filled when they stand cheek by jowl with homes, businesses, churches and schools on the streets where many diverse people live and work and play - places that they value as embodiments of shared aspirations.

In a city the size of San Antonio, if the arts cannot find an adequate audience and support, the

most likely core reason is the failure and dismemberment of community.

In this city, how did that dismemberment occur? Who made it happen, and why? How can the pieces be stitched together again and the community healed? Until we can answer those questions, the arts will remain impoverished and largely ignored.

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